



Title: When the Wealthy Are Poor: Poverty Explanations and Local Perspectives in Southwestern Madagascar

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More details/abstract: To reduce poverty, one must understand what poverty means in local contexts. We used focus groups to elicit a “folk model” of poverty from Masikoro, Vezo, and Mikea people in rural southwestern Madagascar and then placed this model in dialogue with four social science models: economic growth, substantivism, mode of production, and livelihoods. The folk model emphasizes household continuity, production of people, and exploitative expropriation by the wealthy. Absent from the folk model is scarcity of natural and social resources, the core of economic growth and livelihoods explanations. Consistent with substantivism, poverty and wealth are states one may occupy simultaneously, not maximizable quantities. Compatible with mode of production, the root cause of poverty is the rules regarding control over property. Poverty interventions based on profit, competition, intensification, or devolution of control to traditional social institutions would likely be culturally foreign to rural Madagascar and could further the gap between rich and poor.

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**WHEN THE WEALTHY ARE POOR:
POVERTY EXPLANATIONS AND LOCAL PERSPECTIVES IN SOUTHWESTERN
MADAGASCAR***

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ABSTRACT

In order to reduce poverty one must understand what poverty means in local contexts. We used focus groups to elicit a “folk model” of poverty from Masikoro, Vezo, and Mikea people in rural southwestern Madagascar. We dialog this with four models from social science: economic growth, substantivism, mode of production, and livelihoods. The folk model emphasizes household continuity, production of people, and exploitative expropriation by the wealthy. Absent from the folk model is scarcity of natural and social resources, the core of economic growth and livelihoods explanations. Consistent with substantivism, poverty and wealth are states one may occupy rather than maximizable quantities. Consistent with mode of production, the root cause of poverty is control over property rules. Poverty interventions based on profit, competition, intensification, or devolution of control to traditional social institutions would likely be culturally foreign to rural Malagasy, and could further the gap between rich and poor.

Key words: Poverty; Wealth; Madagascar; International Development; Focus groups; Mode of Production

INTRODUCTION

Poverty reduction commands billions of dollars in research and foreign aid for international development each year, while the politics of aid and development occupy much of the work of governments in the Global South. Yet social scientists do not agree on what poverty is. We contribute to this debate by exploring poverty as a folk category, by asking some of those who are labeled “poor” how they understand and experience poverty.

Poverty is among the major sources of human psychosocial suffering (Lund et al. 2010) and morbidity (Acorsi et al. 2005; Nguyen and Peschard 2003). It has been causally linked to social problems including crime (Berk et al. 1980), drug abuse (Becker and Murphy 1988), and unsustainable environmental practices (Reardon and Vosti 1995). National governments and international development organizations work to reduce poverty to encourage economic growth and as a moral duty to improve quality of life and promote security and stability (Hayami and Godo 2005). Yet among the major challenges of poverty reduction is that poverty is difficult to define and measure, especially in societies with non-Western culture and incomplete markets, where food and other resources are more likely to be “purchased” through one’s labor, social ties, and traditional institutions rather than with cash in the marketplace. In these contexts, standard means of identifying poverty may be misleading or inappropriate, if they do not reflect local concepts and lived experiences.

The traditional subjects of anthropology are peoples variably referred to as marginalized, indigenous, minority, underclass, rural, disempowered, subaltern, non-market, or traditional (or previously, primitive, tribal, peasant, etc). Development organizations typically label these same people as “poor.” Yet anthropology does not define itself as the study of poverty. A content search for the keyword “poverty” in AnthroSource pulls up only 157 results out of its estimated

250,000 items (0.063%). Of these, nearly half (N=62) are book reviews, suggesting that anthropologists read what others say about poverty. By contrast, the same search in EBSCO's database of economics articles (EconLit) turns up 26,551 hits out of 1,010,900 items (2.63%). Anthropologists are clearly concerned about related issues including power (1234 results in AnthroSource), class (756 results), economy (635 results), and inequality (184 results). Perhaps anthropologists are reticent to use the term "poverty" because it is too vague; it glosses a heterogeneous set of material, social, political, and nutritional inequalities and disparities. Anthropologists tend to study these inequalities and disparities separately; or study the social production of the poverty category to which people become assigned (Green 2006: 2).

Since the early twentieth century anthropologists were instrumental in discrediting dominant hereditarian explanations for gaps in wealth and achievement in the U.S. (Boas 1916; Kroeber 1916). Anthropologists' continued interest in poverty paralleled broader cultural trends including increased popular attention to poverty reduction following the Great Depression. From the 1960s ethnographers studied the lives of "the poor," particularly in cities, offering representations of the causes and conditions of poorness to counter stereotypes and interrogate hegemonic social categories (Lewis 1966; Mullings 1987; Susser 1996). Other anthropologists approach poverty from critiques of modernity, development, and colonialism, including the construction of regions or peoples as "third world," or "underdeveloped" (Escobar 1988, 1995; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Said 1989). Political economic approaches (Gunder Frank 1970; Roseberry 1988; Wolf 1982) have theorized the historical production inequality within the global capitalist system, including modes of production (Geschiere 1985; Meillassoux 1972; Siskind 1978), neoliberal policy (Morgan and Maskovsky 2003), privatization and decentralization (Ruyle 1987); patterns of consumption and production (Douglass and Isherwood 1996), health

inequalities (Nguyen and Peschard 2003; Pfeiffer and Chapman 2010) and the production of vulnerability, hunger, and food insecurity (Baro and Deubel 2006; Oliver-Smith 1996; Shipton 1990).

While we have studied subsistence risk and bad year economics among Masikoro farmers, Vezo farmers, Vezo fishermen, and Mikea forager-bricoleurs (foragers who opportunistically farm, fish, and retail) of rural southwestern Madagascar for over a decade, like other anthropologists we have been reticent to think of our research subjects as “poor.” Yet Masikoro, Vezo, and Mikea label themselves as poor, using local terms for poverty (*alatsà*) and wealth (*hanagna*) that are not borrowed from the West nor the “official” dialect of Malagasy. But when southwestern Malagasy call themselves poor, do they mean the same thing that social scientists mean when they use the powerful word “poverty?” What happens when poverty models collide? What kinds of policies and interventions are southwestern Malagasy people likely to accept as effective at reducing poverty as they understand and experience it? In this paper we create a dialog between a folk model developed from focus groups among Masikoro, Vezo, and Mikea, and four theoretical models from economics and anthropology.

An *economic growth model* (EGM), the traditional model espoused by development studies, defines poverty as either absolute material deprivation or low income and consumption relative to a “poverty line,” and predicts scarcity due to low production and consumption (Atkinson 1970; Townsend 1954). Vásquez (2001) states that poverty characterized the human condition until the Industrial Revolution, when living standards were radically improved. Proponents of this model argue that the only way to end poverty is economic growth, to bring the Industrial Revolution and capitalism to the rest of the world (Collier 2007; Vásquez 2001), by increasing agricultural intensification (FAO 2009), extending microcredit (Hulme and Mosley

1996), expanding markets for products and labor, especially export production (Kavoussi 1984), reducing transaction costs (Omamo 1998), and improving healthcare and education to increase the market value of labor (Becker 1975). Underlying this model is the assumption that humans are economically rational as defined by neoclassical economic theory; that humans are self-interested profit maximizers.

A *substantivist model* allows for alternate assumptions about human rationality. Polanyi (1977) and Sahlins (1972) argue that poverty and wealth are capitalist notions predicated on unlimited wants and scarcity, whereas in traditional subsistence economies, desires are limited and local resources are adequate to meet them, so that people may experience an “original affluence” of low work, ample leisure time, and an active social life in which Western notions of poverty are meaningless. Outside of capitalism’s culture of maximization, people exchange resources to build social relations and maintain social cohesion, as with Mauss’s analyses of Kula and Potlatch exchanges, where wealth is generated by giving rather than possessing (Mauss 1967). In contrast to the EGM, this model holds that pro-growth development may create poverty by eroding traditional social institutions. The solution to poverty is to promote the authority of traditional social institutions. Some conservation and development projects have attempted this under the rubric of “devolution,” authorizing local people to manage their own resources through traditional customary law (Ramiarison and Razafindrakoto 2004).

A *mode of production* (MoP) model predicts systematically-exploitative social relations. As elaborated by anthropologists Graeber (2006), Meillassoux (1981), and Wolf (1982), MoP defines poverty as a systematic power relationship embedded in a system of production. Like Graeber (2006), we resist traditional typologies of MoPs like Asiatic, feudal, capitalist, or Wolf’s (1982) kin-based, tributary, and capitalist. Rather, the MoP can describe any system of

production consisting of human labor and tools applied to natural resources within the context of property rules. Strategies emerge that allow some people to appropriate the value of other people's labor. Meillassoux (1981) argued that unilineal descent systems constitute rules that allow elders and men to appropriate resources from juniors and women. In economies based on slavery, property rules allow some people to own the laborers themselves (Graeber 2006). In Feudalism, elites expropriate tributes and tithes through control of land. With the Industrial Revolution, the merchant class monopolized ownership of all the means of production, thus forcing the majority of people to sell their labor for much less than the value their labor produced. From this point of view, poverty, as disenfranchisement and alienation, is present in some form in all societies, but capitalism introduces a new and more extreme form, forcing the majority of people to sell their labor for a fraction of its value. The key to reducing poverty is to change property laws to reduce or eliminate exploitation. As capitalism is based on the exploitation of workers, pro-growth development will exacerbate rather than reduce poverty.

A livelihoods model offers a variety of alternative concepts for deprivation and inequality in material and social domains (Ellis 2000). These concepts include capability (Sen 1983), wellbeing (Gasper 2007; McGregor 2006), entitlements (Sen 1981), security (Winslow and Eriksen 2004), and capitals (Ellis 2000; Scoones 1998). Like substantivism, this model recognizes that economic behavior may serve social functions, but it falls short of embracing alternatives to rational choice theory. Like the MoP model, it recognizes the social and political causes of poverty, but at least some proponents do not see poverty as integral to capitalism (e.g. Sen 1999).

Sen (1983) defines poverty as capability deprivation, the lack of freedom for an individual to realize her potential achievements. A complementary term, wellbeing, refers to the

total material, social, and psychological status of a person, and their freedom to act and pursue meaning in life (Gasper 2007). Sen (1981) argues that among the main causes of poverty are entitlement failures, social and political barriers to receiving the fruits of one's labor, such as corruption, unfair wages, discrimination, and poor access to technology, credit, and markets (Sen 1981). Entitlement failures make rural households more vulnerable as their ability to cope with risk and change diminishes (Adger 2006). Ellis (2000) and Scoones (1998) have promoted the concept that rural households seek multiple forms of capital, including physical, financial, natural, human, and social capitals. Capitals are fungible, meaning that they may be exchanged for one another (Ellis 2000:34). To prevent poverty governments should establish human security (Winslow and Eriksen 2004), which includes freedom from conflict, promotion of human rights, fair governance, education, healthcare, and economic opportunity. Sen (1999:37) also promotes economic growth, specifically, improving access to assets and to markets for products and labor.

ETHNOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

Local oral historians generally agree that Masikoro, Vezo, and Mikea share common historical origins associated with the rise of the Andrevola and Maroseragna kingdoms in the 17th century (Tucker 2003; Yount et al. 2001). Throughout the west coast of Madagascar, Masikoro became a term associated with loyal, tribute-paying vassals of the kings, while Vezo and Mikea resisted royal domination by escaping to the sea and forest respectively. Today, ethnic identity is flexible and negotiated. One popular discourse equates identity with subsistence occupation so that farmers are Masikoro, fishermen are Vezo, and hunter-gatherers are Mikea. Another discourse says that identity depends on whether one's clan or family is traditionally Masikoro,

Vezo, or Mikea.

Many households maintain diversified portfolios of foraging, fishing, farming, herding, and marketing regardless of identity. While Mikea define themselves as hunter-gatherers, a survey we conducted among 54 Mikea adults in three communities in 2007-2008 found that on average 58% of income (food production valued at market rates) came from agriculture. While Vezo purport to be people of the sea, there are two Vezo marine livelihoods: the sea-Vezo (*Veẓondriake*) who live on the beach by fishing and gathering, and the mud-Vezo (*Veẓompotake*) who combine marine exploitation with farming maize, manioc, sweet potatoes, and watermelons in the coastal forests and mudflats.

Southwestern Malagasy refer to poverty as *alatsà* and to the poor as *latsa*, a term that elsewhere in Madagascar means “insult” (Richardson 1967 [1855]). Wealth, *hanagna*, may be a derivation of the verb “to have” (*mana*), or perhaps the Arabic word for wealth, *ghina*. Standard Malagasy words for poverty (*alahelo*, *fahantrana*, and *foroforo*) and wealth (*fanjava*; Richardson 1967 [1855]) are not commonly used in the region.

Masikoro, Vezo, and Mikea are poor by Western measures. According to data we collected among 448 adults in seven villages in 2007-2008, Masikoro, Vezo, and Mikea produce the equivalent of less than 1.5 U.S. dollars per day, including subsistence and market production. Masikoro averaged 2.4 years of formal education, Vezo 3.6 years, and Mikea 0.6 years. The region has no electricity except for that produced by the occasional solar panel, car battery, or gasoline powered generator. There is no running water. Food insecurity is common, as farmers await future harvests, as fishermen find their work stymied by uncooperative winds and tides, and as forest foragers cope with overharvested natural resources.

Masikoro, Vezo, and Mikea have different histories of exposure to markets and

international development. While in past decades Masikoro and Mikea participated in export production of wild silk, butterbeans, cotton, and maize, today their market activity is largely limited to local exchange in village markets and shop keeping. By contrast, many sea-Vezo communities are heavily involved in export production, selling most of the finfish, octopus, and sea cucumbers they harvest to exporters and purchasing consumables from traders.

The region is currently facing massive changes due to conservation and development programs. The Malagasy government is urging Masikoro to title land while simultaneously conceding large tracks for the strip-mining of smelter-grade ilmenite and for oil exploration. Developers are purchasing Vezo beaches to build tourists' resorts. Mikea are being slowly displaced as the result of a new Mikea Forest Protected Area (Tucker 2007).

There are at least two traditional social institutions that could influence local poverty and wealth concepts. First, ethnohistoric sources claim that during the reign of the kings, the patrilineal clans were rigidly divided into strata. Flacourt (1913 [1660]:78-81), Fagereng (1950:141) and Lavondes (1967:121-125) describe at least three "castes" of clans: the *Andriana* royal families, the freemen or *Vohitse* clans, and the *Andevo* or slave clans. In our experience, Masikoro, Mikea, and Vezo remain aware of whether their clan is *Andriana*, *Vohitse*, or *Andevo*. Nearly all the participants in the current study are from *Vohitse* clans.

The second traditional poverty-wealth social institution involves cattle. Throughout Madagascar cattle symbolize links between living members of descent groups and deceased ancestors. Southwestern Malagasy give cattle as bridewealth at marriages (*soritse*) and sacrifice cattle for ceremonies such as rites of filiation (*soronanake*), circumcision (*savatse*), invocations of ancestors (*soro*), and healing festivals (*bilo*), although Vezo rarely circumcise. While Masikoro identity is most closely connected to cattle ownership, Mikea and Vezo also use cattle

in clan rituals, and their oral histories are replete with discussions of cattle (Tucker 2003:208). Cattle were traditionally clan property and men's property. Since colonialism, herders have been required to carry a "cattle passport" documenting private ownership, although it remains customary to donate cattle for clan functions.

METHODS

We used focus group methodology because we were primarily interested in the shared, cultural models of poverty and wealth. Focus groups generate a different kind of data than individual interviews (Morgan 1996) or ethnography (Agar and MacDonald 1995; Hollander 2004). Focus groups generate fewer unique ideas but explore them in greater detail (Morgan 1996). Focus groups are halfway between a meeting, operated by the researcher, and a conversation among participants (Agar and MacDonald 1995). Because participants speak with each other as well as with the researcher, there is pressure to form consensus (Smithson 2000).

Hollander (2004) identifies two challenges to conducting effective focus groups: problematic speeches, and problematic silences. Problematic speeches occur when participants make overly normative statements that suggest greater unanimity than actually exists among the participants. Problematic silences occur when dissenting participants do not feel free to disagree with the group's emerging consensus. Among the solutions of these challenges are, first, to use focus groups specifically to obtain normative discourses. As Smithson (2000:114) concludes, "...the focus group [is] a forum for generating public discourses about a topic, and not as a way of uncovering participants' 'real' views." Second, the research design manages problematic speeches and silences through "segmentation," conducting separate groups with demographically similar segments of the population.

In rural southwestern Madagascar, women are unlikely to speak their minds in the presence of men, so we segmented by sex. At each site we did separate focus groups for women

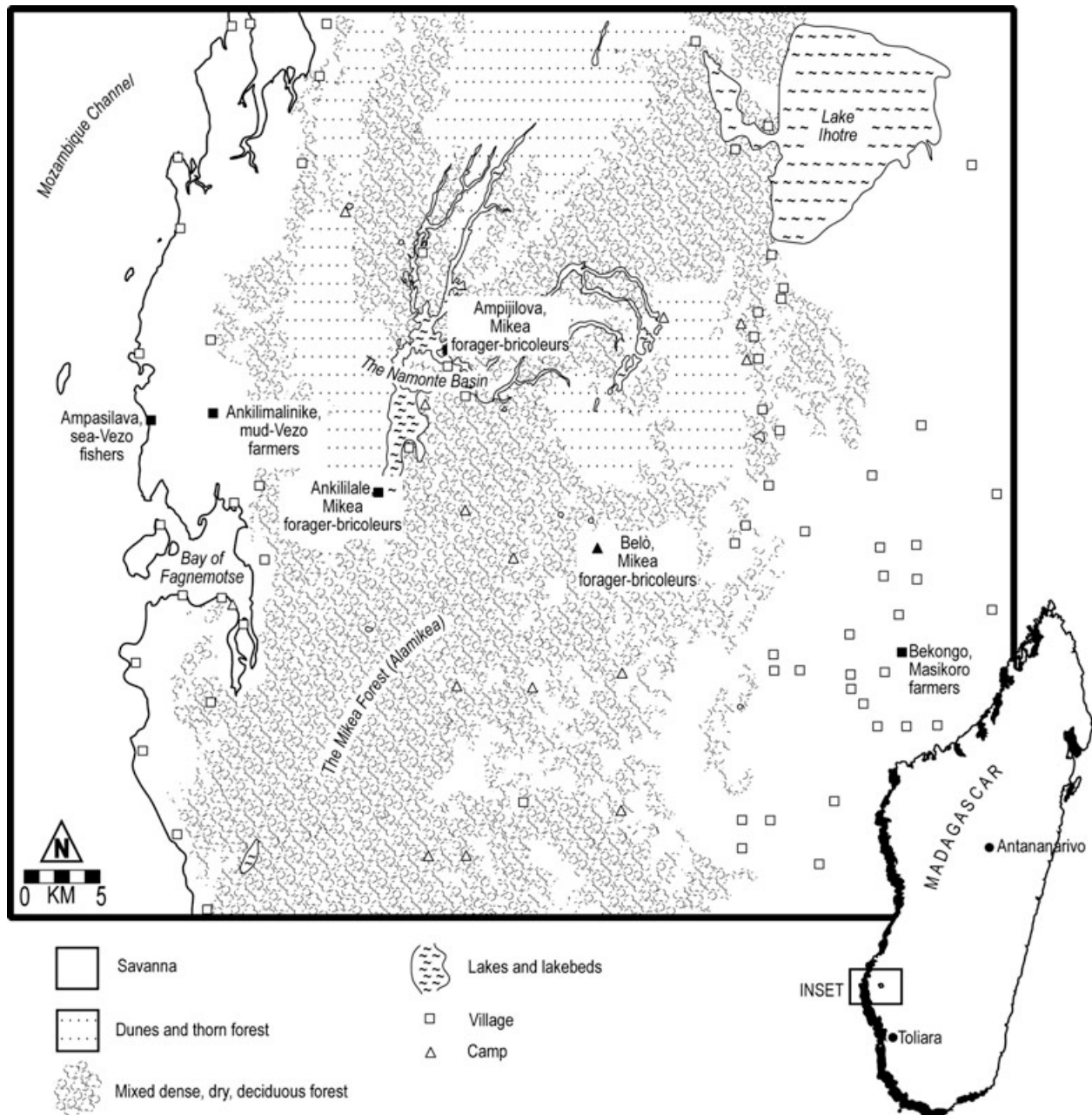


Figure 1: Map of southwestern Madagascar showing location of places mentioned in text.

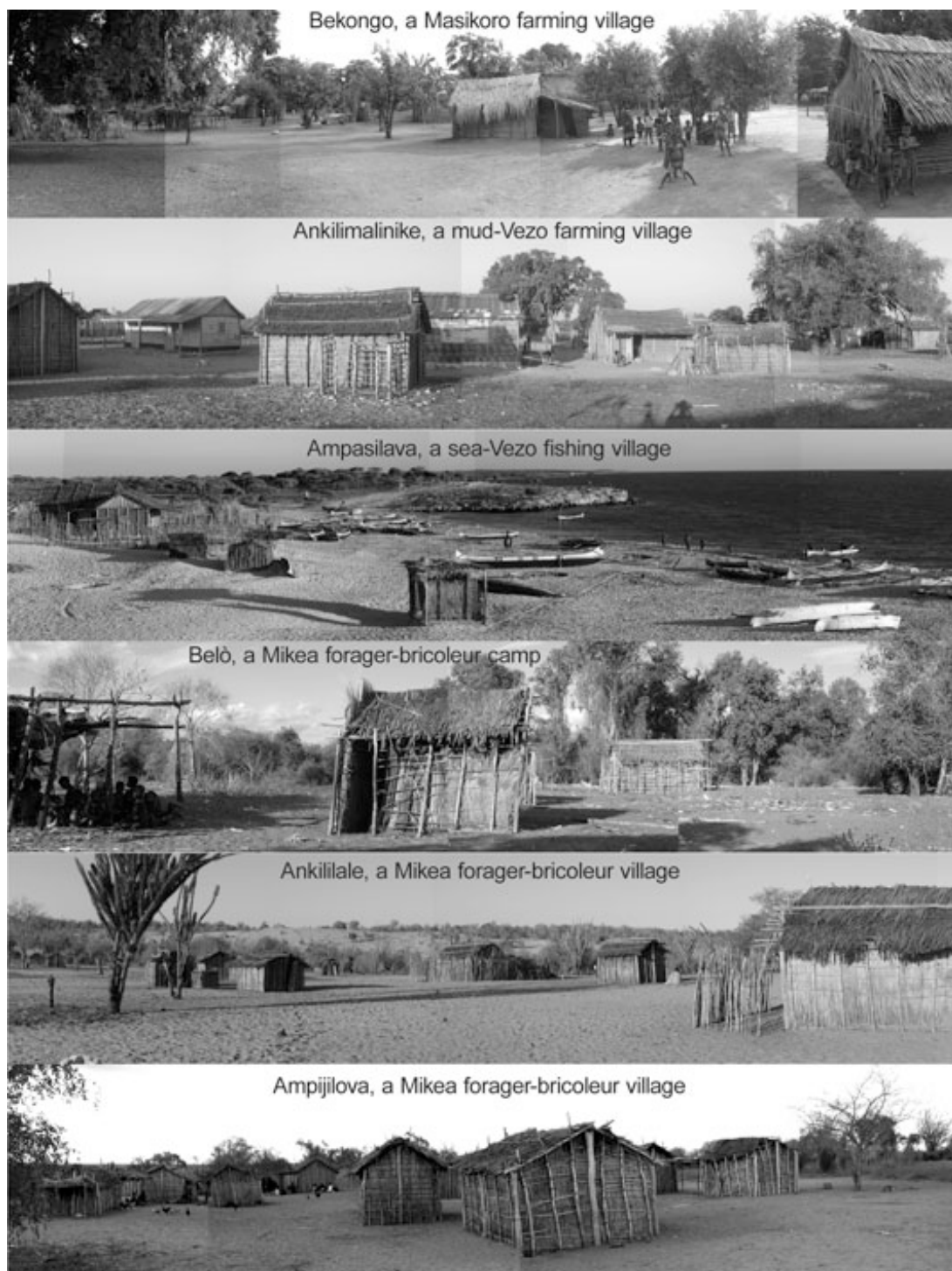


Figure 2: A glimpse of the six field sites.

and men, conducted by researchers of the same sex as the participants. Masikoro are particularly gerontocratic, so at the Masikoro site we further segmented by age, holding separate focus groups for elder women (*nzarahe be*), elder men (*nahoda be*), junior women (*sevake tanora*), and junior men (*lahy tanora*), allowing participants to choose which to attend. In our previous research we found Mikea to be taciturn in formal group settings, so we repeated the Mikea focus groups in three communities with whom we had a long history of fieldwork. We tried to manage problematic silences by performing follow-up interviews with particularly interesting or shy participants.

We were not strangers in any of the six study communities, having consistently visited or worked in them during the preceding decade or more (Figure 1). The six field sites and number of focus group participants are as follows: Bekongo, a Masikoro farming village (10 elder women, 10 junior women, 9 elder and 12 junior men); Ankilimalinike, a mud-Vezo farming village (18 women, 10 men); Ampasilava, a sea-Vezo fishing village (38 women, 33 men); and the Mikea communities of Belò (12 women, 7 men), Ankililale (21 women, 17 men), and Ampijilova (15 women, 12 men). Some focus groups were larger than we had wished (particularly at Ampasilava), but we had little control over attendance.

Consistent with Malagasy tradition and our IRB permission, focus groups occurred following a public assembly of the townspeople (*fokon'olo*) in which the village president and elder men introduced the researchers and then permitted us to explain the objectives of the larger project. These introductions took the form of *kabary*, public, poetic pronouncements. Our *kabary* explained who we are, the risks and benefits of the project, and promises of confidentiality. We explained the goals of the larger project, which involved a livelihoods questionnaire and risk and time choice experiments (data not discussed here). We were careful

not to introduce leading information that could bias the focus groups, saying only that we wished to ask them about poverty and wealth.

Once participants were segregated by sex (and by age at Bekongo), they were served coffee and cookies while researchers posed the following questions:

1. How can you tell whether someone is poor (*latsa*)? What must a person have or do to be identified as poor?
2. How can you tell whether someone is wealthy (*manakanagna*)? What must a person have or do to be identified as wealthy?
3. Who is more wealthy:
 - a. Someone with many cattle, or someone with much cash?
 - b. Someone with many cattle, or someone with a large family?
 - c. Someone with many cattle, or someone with much food?
4. Are there wealthy clans? Are there clans that have more than others?
5. In your opinion, is your village poor or wealthy?
6. For someone poor, is there a method to leave poverty and arrive to wealth?

Table 1 reproduces these questions in the local dialect of Malagasy.

Informants were generally quite eager to talk, and spoke in affable, assertive statements, although few if any responses approached the public poetics of *kabary*. At no time did we get the feeling that our informants found the questions to be impolite or overly sensitive. The amount of discussion varied by group and question. Question 4 generated the least discussion. Informants were unanimous that whether one belongs to a royal, commoner, or slave clan no

longer influences wealth. Often, participants indicated agreement with one another by nodding heads or saying yes, although there were several disagreements. As we predicted, Mikea tended to give solitary answers with little discussion. That is, until we reached questions 5 and 6, when participants at Belò, the participants we had known the longest, provided thorough and at times emotional responses.

Table 1: Focus group questions in Malagasy.

1. Manao akory gny ahaiza gn'olo raiky fa latsa? Mana igno gn'olo raiky ahafaha mivola fa latsa?
2. Manao akory gny ahaiza gn'olo manakanagna? Mana igno gn'olo raiky ahafaha mivola fa manakanagna?
3. Ia gny tena manakanagna:
 gny managn'aombe, sa gny manan-drala?
 gny managn'aombe, sa gny manan-dongo?
 gny managn'aombe, sa gny manan-kany?
4. Misy razan'olo mpagnarivo, tena mpagnarivo? Misy firazagnan'olo manandraha mihoatse gn'ilany?
5. Araky gny fahitanareo azy, gn'olo antanà eto latsa sa manakanagna?
6. Laha latsa tegna, misy fomba va ahafaha miala gny alatsà ka hahatonga antegna hanankananga?

RESULTS

Masikoro farmers at Bekongo

At first glance, Bekongo appears to be a Garden of Eden. Bekongo is 200 or so wattle-and-daub and reed houses located within an orchard of orange, papaya, and mango trees, surrounded by a maze of irrigation channels and rice fields that make the village a verdant island in the tall grasses of the savanna. The shade of mature tamarind trees provides respite from the fierce sun. Beneath one tamarind a bulldozer from a 1950s oil exploration project slowly rusts.

Yet all was not well at Bekongo in June 2006. Several days before our arrival a teenaged girl had been raped and killed by a gang of boys to whom she had refused sex. There had been reports of sexual abuse of an infant. We met a 12 year-old girl who was married an adult man. The divorce rate in town was very high. Many suffered from tuberculosis. Many families were living off famine foods-- boiled sweet potato greens and unripe papayas-- despite the fact that it was harvest season, and the rice harvest was bountiful.

In the focus groups Bekongo people defined poverty as insufficient food and things, as well as a dependence on credit. The elder women emphasized food shortage. "Poverty is not eating for a day," said the first speaker; others added, "poverty as not eating enough;" "poverty is not eating full meals." Junior women and elder men emphasized insufficiency of possessions. A junior woman said that poverty is lacking ox carts, chickens, and other possessions. An elder man explained that those who lack cattle and chickens "cannot make a livelihood" (*tsy mahavelomanpò*). Another elder man said the poor do not farm; a junior man explained that even someone with two cows is poor, for three cattle are needed to till rice fields.

The junior men defined poverty as dependence on credit, and so helped us to understand why they were eating famine foods despite their bountiful rice harvest. The first speaker said the

poor borrow money. The next said that even a farmer with a large rice field is poor once the rice is harvested. After the focus group they explained a system called *mikonty* or *kontrà* by which a farmer borrows against their future harvest. The creditor, a well-to-do farmer, gives 1000 MGA to the debtor in exchange for one *daba* (9.2 liter container) of unthreshed rice at harvest time. As a *daba* of rice is worth about 13,600 MGA, the interest rate over a 90-day growing season is up to 5040%. At harvest time many farmers owe much of their rice to creditors.

In all focus groups Bekongo people defined wealth as cattle, between 10 head (according to an elder woman) and 200 head (according to an elder man). An elder woman insisted that cattle are wealth “because we are Masikoro;” another said cattle are wealth because they can be sold to buy things. A junior woman said cattle are simply the part of wealth that is most public. After the elder men debated the number of cattle one must have to be wealthy, we asked whether someone with two ox carts, two plows, and three houses is wealthy; or someone with 2000 goats; or someone with a lot of money. The reply to each question was, not as wealthy as someone with cattle.

But in response to question 3, most groups agreed that someone with a large family or much food is wealthier than someone with cattle. We asked an elder man to explain this apparent paradox. He explained that cattle are how one obtains kin. Cattle are sacrificed to invoke ancestors when sealing marriages, claiming children during rites of filiation, inducting boys into manhood during circumcision, and returning the sick to health in healing ceremonies.

All focus groups concluded that their village is poor; poorer than other Masikoro villages, an elder woman volunteered. “Many in Bekongo have nothing,” an elder man said. He then explained that many poor men in Bekongo are capable of farming but lack plows, tillers, and other tools. An elder and a junior woman independently said the poor could become wealthy if

Vazaha (a word that glosses white people, foreigners, military, and government) provided Kubota tractors. Upon further inquiry we learned that three wealthy men controlled the irrigation network and owned the majority of the irrigated land, so that most rice farmers were sharecroppers. Most households had claims to land in the savanna, but they could not convert it to rice fields without tractors.

Other suggestions for how a poor person might become wealthy included selling produce at distant markets, far from friends who dun favors (junior woman); work hard and consult a wizard (elder man); and conserve stored food (junior man).

Mud-Vezo farmers, Ankilimalinike

As our field vehicle, an agricultural tractor, chugged through coastal forests, past maize swiddens and gardens of sweet potatoes and watermelon and into the mud-Vezo village of Ankilimalinike, at first we thought that we had come to an abandoned village. Most of the 122 houses, which vary from reed thatch to tabby (lime and seashell plaster) to corrugated metal, were closed and locked, and the livestock pens were empty. An elderly woman appeared. She explained that armed bandits had raided the village a few weeks previously. They shot rifles into the air, frightening the residents into abandoning their homes and hiding in the forest. The bandits took everything they could, from livestock to clothing to cooking pots with hot food still inside. What they could not carry off they destroyed. She showed us her last working bucket, which was badly cracked. In response to the insecurity many people were camping on the nearby beach, earning cash by selling marine products. By the evening enough people had returned to conduct focus groups. Not surprisingly, the recent raid was much on people's minds.

Ankilimalinike people said that poverty is lacking the things one needs to make a living. The poor lack livelihood (*velomanpò*) one man said; two women said the poor lack ox carts, one adding that without a cart a woman must transport commodities to market on her head. The poor have bad houses said a woman. An elder man said the poor have tattered clothing and “do not look like others in town” (*tsy mitovy amin’olo antanà*).

A woman defined wealth as having 50 cattle; a man, as having 10 cattle. Another man interrupted that shopkeepers are wealthy, although a third man disagreed, stating that shops and money do not constitute wealth unless the person has many children. In response to question 3, both male and female groups concluded that someone with a large family or a lot of food is wealthier than someone with cattle, suggesting, as above, that cattle are a means for growing families and obtaining food.

We were poor even before the raid, said a woman, although in the men’s group the first speaker said that the village was historically rich but has been impoverished by raiders. Another woman suggested that they could become wealthy if Vazaha provided them with fishing gear; then they would leave their agricultural lifeway to exploit the sea. An elder man said that the poor are simply lazy, and the route to wealth is hard work.

Sea-Vezo fishers, Ampasilava

Arrayed along the blindingly white sands of the beach at Ampasilava are the components of the complicated toolkit that Vezo use to exploit the sea. There is an impressive fleet of dugout outrigger canoes (*laka*), as well as racks of nylon nets of varying mesh size and states of repair. Oars, sails, fishing spears (*voloso* and *kijaomanta*), masks, snorkels, fins, harpoon guns, and boots for walking atop reefs complete the kit. Also on the beach are stands where exporters

Murex and Copofrito purchase the majority of what Vezo catch; and the dance halls where successful fishermen spend some of their earnings. We arrived during springtide, the point in the two-week solar/lunar cycle when there are the greatest extremes of low and high tide. At low tide teams of men stretched nets in the blue-green waters while women and children waded along the reef top, appearing to walk on water, hunting octopus, sea cucumbers, and sea urchins. Focus groups were, by necessity, scheduled around the tides.

There was great unanimity in response to the first two questions in the focus groups. The first woman to speak said, “the poor lack fishing gear with which to make a living” (*lafa tsy mana fitavoa andriake, tsy misy velomanpò*). The other women listed examples of necessary gear, including spears and nets. In the men’s group the first speaker said that a poor man “lacks the things a rich man has” (*tsy mana raha hazony*); the next said a poor man “lacks materials necessary to make a living” (*raha amelomanpò tsy misy aminy*) such as canoes and nets. The poor wear loin clothes, said another; and a poor man catches no prey at sea and so has no children.

“There are no limits to the things a rich man has” (*tsy efa raha hazony*) said the first male respondent to question 2, listing canoes, nets, money, and oxcarts with automobile tires. A shy elder said a wealthy person “is always on the move” (*olo mikarakara*), never sleeps at home, travels far, and so has many children. Among the women, a succession of speakers said the rich own nets, fishing line, spears, and canoes. The final woman to speak said that fishing gear is wealth because it provides a livelihood (*velomanpò*).

A woman explained that Ampasilava people are poor because only about ten people own all the fishing gear in town. Other fishers must rent gear to make a living. While the first male speaker said Ampasilava people are poor, the second (himself a wealthy shopkeeper) said

Ampasilava was in the middle, for people migrate to Ampasilava just to rent fishing equipment. For sea-Vezo, escaping poverty involves hard work and money. A woman said that for a poor person to become rich she must borrow money to buy something to retail elsewhere; she must “find the road to sales” (*mila lalambarotse*). Another said one must borrow money to invest in gear such as boots and spears for reef flat collecting. A man said to escape poverty one must avoid profligate spending at dance halls, for which Vezo have a reputation. Another said the poor are lazy and should work harder.

Mikea forager-bricoleurs at Belò, Ankililale, and Ampijilova

Belò is among the last of the forest camps that were settled during the swidden maize boom of the 1980s. Today it consists of a dozen thatch houses in a mosaic of forest and regenerating swiddens. Ampijilova and Ankililale are large villages located atop dunes overlooking the lakebeds of the Namonte Basin. Mikea households move frequently between forest camps like Belò where they may dig wild tubers and plant maize, to villages like Ankililale and Ampijilova where they attend family ceremonies, fishing spots, and manioc gardens, and Masikoro and Vezo villages where they may sharecrop, retail, and do wage labor.

We refer to Mikea as “forager-bricoleurs” because, while they pride themselves on their hunting and gathering knowledge and gain much of their food from wild resources, the Mikea economy is really about opportunism, flexibility, and mobility. From life history interviews we learned that Mikea have extremely diversified work histories. One elder man recalled that at different periods in his life he supported his family by subsistence foraging; commercial foraging of silk cocoons sold to exporters and small game sold to Masikoro farmers; cash cropping butterbeans, manioc, and maize; fishing at sea; and fishing in lakes. Another elder man recalled

a work history involving terrestrial and marine foraging, carpentry, military service, manioc and sweet potato gardening, swidden maize, retailing tobacco, and wage work transporting merchandize to market. An elder woman spoke of foraging, fishing, rice-related wage work, weaving mats and baskets for sale, raising chickens for sale, retailing snuff tobacco, preparing meals for oil explorers, and manioc and maize cultivation; she also gained income as a spirit medium. Accompanying Mikea economic opportunism is a sort of social opportunism, as households shift between residence in villages and in the forest. As we discuss, social exclusion and forest residence as well as low education and literacy leave Mikea vulnerable to exploitation by their neighbors.

In the focus groups, a young woman at Belò defined poverty as digging wild tubers for a living. She added, poverty is working for someone else rather than oneself, for example, pounding someone else's maize in exchange for the maize chaff. Poverty is sleeping hungry, according to a woman at Ankililale; and having no possessions except maybe one spoon or pot, according to a woman at Ampijilova. The eldest man at Belò said poverty is "not owning anything" (*tsy manan-draha*), a statement replicated by a man at Ampijilova. At Ankililale, one man said the poor lack cattle, to which his friend replied that a man who has cattle but is hungry has wealth but is poor at the same time.

The first speaker in each focus group said that wealth is cattle. Subsequent speakers listed other objects, including firearms and shops (Belò woman); goats (Ankililale woman); goats, cooking pots, and spoons (Belò man); food (Belò man); and cash (Ampijilova man).

In all Mikea focus groups with one exception, the consensus was that someone with a large family or food is wealthier than someone with cattle. The eldest man at Belò joked that if one becomes sick from drinking too much liquor, kin will take care of you while cattle will not.

Only the Belò women disagreed. One said food and money are easily exhausted while the monetary and meat value of cattle are difficult to exhaust; a second added that cattle wealth multiplies as new calves are born.

We asked the eldest man at Belò to clarify an apparent contradiction. If poverty is *not* owning cattle, goats, pots, and spoons while wealth is owning these items, are not Belò people wealthy, since we could see their cattle, goats, pots, and spoons? He explained that their visible possessions down to the last spoon are family property rather than private property; such materials are wealth only if an individual can sell them in an emergency. Cattle are the best form of wealth because of their large size and high price tag, and because they reproduce.

When we asked whether Belò people are wealthy or poor, the women had much to say. The first speaker said they are poor, and a second said that they are the poorest even among Mikea because they are exclusively tuber diggers. The first speaker said that it is impossible for them to leave poverty because it is inherited from their ancestors. God (*Ndragnahare*) made them poor, and only God can decide to end their poverty. Another woman said that they are essentially rich because of their access to bountiful wild resources, including tubers, honey, and tenrecs, but they are made poor by Masikoro who steal from them and cheat them in the marketplace.

“We cannot escape poverty” (*tsy azo ialà alatsà*), said the eldest man at Belò. Because we dig tubers for a living, we are always dirty and our clothes are torn, so people know we are Mikea. Thus we cannot earn fair wages or succeed in the marketplace. A younger man continued: when Mikea seek wage work the employer looks at our tattered clothing and knows he can offer low wages. A third young man told us about how he had worked as a cattle guard for a Masikoro man for eight years, during which time he was fed table scraps. He had

approached his boss to ask for nicer clothes so he could go to market, but the boss refused. By tradition, a cattle guard earns a calf for each year of service. When our informant asked for his calves, the boss said that he had fed and clothed him for eight years; does he also expect calves? (He finally received some but not all the promised calves). The same informant then told us that several weeks earlier his “blood brother” (*fatidrà*), a Masikoro man, had borrowed his two oxen. When our informant went to retrieve the oxen he found out that his *fatidrà* had sold them.

During our fieldwork we have witnessed a litany of cases where neighboring villagers have tricked Mikea out of the fruits of their labor. These cases range from armed raids as described at Ankilimalinike, to livestock theft, to unfounded accusations of wrongdoing reported to gendarmes, to unfair prices in the market. In the early-1990s Robert Kelly and Lin Poyer described cartels who coerced Mikea tuber diggers into selling their wares at low prices, so they could retail the tubers at a markup at the village market in Vorehe (Kelly and Poyer personal communication). In the mid-1990s a Masikoro man made his living by trading broken radio-cassette players to Mikea in exchange for goats. In 2006 two employees of Madagascar National Parks (MNP) were dismissed after the authors of this paper reported to MNP that they had extracted fake fines from several Belò men. Increasingly, disputes of all sorts end with the involvement of the gendarmes, Madagascar’s rural police force. Gendarmes have little power to settle disputes; instead, they often demand bribes from both plaintiffs and defendants, paid in cash or livestock. Mikea are easy targets for villagers who are jealous of their economic successes and for corrupt gendarmes because Mikea rarely have up-to-date internal passports, cattle passports, firearm registrations, and because they often live on the social margins of villages or in isolation in the forest.

In both male and female focus groups at Ankililale, the first speakers said they are poor due to bandits who had raided the village shortly before the raid on Ankilimalinike. A Lutheran convert at Ankililale said that to leave poverty one must abandon foraging and become a farmer, for the Christian God prefers agriculture. A man at Ampijilova explained that “to leave poverty one must find something to improve the livelihood” (*Azo ialanà gny alatsà raha mandeha soa gny velomanpò*), which, according to other speakers, could include acquiring irrigated land or selling snakehead fish (Ampijilova women); planting manioc (Ankililale woman); or selling cocoons to silk buyers (Ampijilova man).

THE FOLK MODEL

At first glance it appears that the folk model is consistent with the Western model of poverty and wealth as resource deprivation and accumulation. Participants defined poverty in terms of *not having* such things as food, tools, clothes, and land, and wealth in terms of *having* such things as cattle, goats, and tools. Yet a closer look at the responses reveals that “having” is not a goal into itself, but defined relative to the support of the household economy or *velomanpò*. The word *velomanpò* translates literally as “what enlivens (*velomà*) the heart (*fo*),” but in practice it has several meanings. *Velomanpò* refers to one’s profession as a farmer, forager, fisher, shopkeeper, carpenter, teacher, etc. It refers to the household’s management of resources and labor, akin to mode of production. And *velomanpò*, whose literal translation mirrors the English word livelihood, refers to the portfolio of opportunities and strategies by which households survive, cope, and reproduce.

The poor “cannot support their *velomanpò*” according to an elder Bekongo man; another said, the poor cannot farm. The poor “lack *velomanpò*” according to a man at Ankilimalinike.

Among the fishers at Ampasilava, one man said a poor person “does not have the things necessary to have a velomanpò;” a woman said, “when there is no fishing gear there is no velomanpò.” A Mikea woman at Belò denigrated her own velomanpò by defining poverty as digging tubers for a living. She further defined poverty as doing wage labor, someone else’s velomanpò, and earning less than the true value of one’s labor, the maize chaff rather than the cupules that are consumed as porridge. A Mikea man said that poverty is owning “insufficient things,” presumably, insufficient to make a living. To leave poverty, said another Mikea man, one must find some way to improve the velomanpò. Those without ox carts are poor because carts are necessary for the marketing velomanpò. Those with only two cows are poor because three are needed to till a rice field. Those without fishing gear are poor because they cannot harvest food from the sea.

Wealth refers to having the necessary materials to maintain the velomanpò. This is most obvious among sea-Vezo at Ampasilava, where one woman stated that fishing gear is wealth because it provides velomanpò from the sea. To understand why cattle are wealth among Masikoro and Mikea, we must consider the functions of cattle in farming and forest-based ways of life.

For farmers, including Masikoro and mud-Vezo cultivators as well as some Mikea, cattle are wealth because support one of the velomanpò’s main functions, the production of people, and thereby support the most economically-significant social institutions, the household (*tragno*) and the clan (*firazagna*). Ritual cattle sacrifice seals marriage and filiation contracts, initiates boys into manhood, and returns the sick to the social fabric of the healthy. Households and clans organize the labor and distribute the resources and tools by which food is produced and the social structure is reproduced.

For Mikea forager-bricoleurs, cattle are the largest and most durable of a range of private possessions that can be liquidated in an emergency. This is central to the forest *velomanpò* because the residential and social mobility (and low literacy) central to the Mikea way of life means that Mikea are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by their neighbors. Mikea periodically require large quantities of cash to pay bribes and fines, and to purchase new clothes and tools.

The *velomanpò* produces both food and people. Most groups agreed that someone with many kin is wealthier than someone with many cattle. Poverty is not being able to support one's family (Ankilimalinike man); cash and shops does not make one wealthy unless one has children (Ankilimalinike man); a poor person catches nothing at sea and so has no children (Ampasilava man); wealth is having many children as the result of one's hard work (Ampasilava man).

Money plays an ambiguous role in the folk model of poverty and wealth. Money was rarely mentioned in the focus groups. In response to the question what is poverty, only one speaker, an Elder Bekongo man, mentioned money, using a play on words, the two nearly identical phrases “doesn't have money” (*tsy manan-drala*) and “doesn't have things” (*tsy manan-draha*). In response to the question what is wealth, of 35 recorded comments only four mention money, and in two cases the speaker stated that money does not constitute wealth unless the person has cattle (said an elder Bekongo man) or family (said an Ankilimalinike man). Yet, in response to question three, participants in several focus groups considered someone with a lot of cash to be more wealthy than someone with a lot of cattle. There are no clear trends by gender or ethnicity. The value of cash seems to be limited to its ability to acquire other useful goods and services.

Poverty appears to refer to the short-term experiences of velomanpò failure, while wealth is having the right stuff to sustain the velomanpò over the long term. So unlike capitalistic notions that poverty and wealth are opposite ends on a continuum of not having and having, in southwestern Madagascar these appear to be states that one occupies simultaneously. As a man at Ankililale explained, if a man has cattle but is hungry, he has wealth but is poor.

The final focus group question probed people's understanding of the causes of poverty, by asking whether a poor person could become wealthy. While a few speakers said that the poor were simply lazy, at each site speakers described structural factors that lead to inequality. For farmers at Bekongo, poverty was the result of unequal access to irrigated land and the resulting sharecropping arrangements and dependence on credit. For farmers at Ankilimalinike and Mikea at Ankililale, poverty was the result of bandits who physically expropriated their resources in violent raids. For sea-Vezo at Ampasilava, poverty is caused by unequal ownership of fishing gear, and resulting rental relationships. Mikea, as one Belò woman put it, are essentially rich because unlike farmers and marine fishers, they do not require specialized tools nor cooperative labor to harvest the bounty of wild tubers and honey in the forest. Among Mikea, poverty results from systematic discrimination and vulnerability to exploitation.

DIALOGS

The folk model meets the EGM

Proponents of the EGM envision the causes of poverty as scarcity of resources, inefficient technologies for harvesting resources, and an insufficient market infrastructure for turning resources into profit. Significantly, scarcity of natural resources was never mentioned in the focus groups. The scarcity that participants described is social rather than natural, the result

of unequal ownership of the means of production and appropriation. The technologies that they perceived as having the power to lift one out of poverty—tractors at Bekongo, fishing gear on the coast—would reduce reliance on rental arrangements and create more equity in the distribution of resources, rather than increase production.

It is also significant that while the majority of our Masikoro and Mikea informants have participated in cash cropping and export markets in the past, markets that have all gone bust, no focus group participant mentioned failed export markets as a cause of poverty, or new export markets as a pathway out of poverty. We imagine that southwestern Malagasy are unlikely to participate in development projects promising that better productive technologies and cash crops will reduce local experiences of poverty.

Central to the philosophy of the EGM, and indeed most economic theory since the mid 19th century, is the assumption that profit maximization is a basic human motive. While the question whether people's subconscious mental processes are governed by maximization principles is beyond the scope of this study, it is notable that maximization is not an explicit part of the local model of poverty and wealth. Rather, the goal is one of household maintenance and a thriving *velomanpò* that can cope with variability and disasters, keep children fed, and reproduce social institutions. Wealth in the folk model is not something that can be maximized. It is a state of long-term subsistence stability, existing alongside poverty's shorter-term experiences of deprivation.

The ambiguous role that money plays in the local model of poverty and wealth suggests that money is a medium of exchange and not a valuable in and of itself. Money allows people to convert one commodity into another (in Marx's notation $C \rightarrow M \rightarrow C$) and is not something

maximized for its own benefit ($M \rightarrow C \rightarrow M$). Development projects based on business models are unlikely to gain local acceptance in the study region.

The folk model meets the substantivist model

The basic philosophy of the folk model is commensurate with some form of the substantivist model, for economic goals are subsumed within social goals of household and clan maintenance and continuity, and economic actors satisfy rather than maximize. Yet specific substantivist concepts such as original affluence and reciprocal and redistributive institutions are less consistent with the folk model. In contrast original affluence, southwestern Malagasy do have clear concepts of poverty and wealth that are not imported from the West. Some traditional social institutions appear to no longer function. Informants were unanimous that descendants of royal, commoner, and slave clans have no noticeable differences in wealth. The cattle complex remains a significant structural principle among Masikoro farmers in Bekongo, perhaps this is because farming is a collective activity; although this is less obvious at other sites.

Madagascar has tried an island-wide experiment in returning control of natural resources to traditional social institutions, a program called GELOSE (*Gestion Locale Sécurise*) (Ramiarison and Razafindrakoto 2004). Among the reasons the project failed was that the traditional institutions to which power was given were mistranslated. The architects of GELOSE sought to tie resource decisions to *dina*, which in the High Plateau refers to traditional customary law. But in southwestern Madagascar *dina* refers exclusively to payment of bloodwealth, cattle paid to families to compensate for raiding-related injuries. Development projects based on traditional social institutions require a proper understanding of local institutions, which are best provided by local people.

The folk model meets the MoP

The folk model of poverty and wealth bears close resemblance to the Marxian notion of MoP, where, as explained above, we resist traditional typologies of Asiatic, Feudal, etc. and define the MoP as a relationship between natural resources and labor, where labor includes physical exertion (labor power), tools (means of production), and property rights and rules (the social relations of production). Consistent with Graeber's extension of the concept, the *velomanpò* produces both commodities and people.

Among Masikoro and Vezo farmers, the key natural resources are earth, seed and water. People defined poverty as lacking the means of production necessary for cultivation: land, labor, irrigation, tillers, and plows. Poverty is not caused by a scarcity of these things. It results when wealthy farmers dominate the social relations of production, in this case land tenure rules, so that all other farmers must sharecrop. Wealth for Masikoro comes from mastery over kin-based social relations of production through cattle ownership, and the maintenance of household and clan which organize farm labor.

Similarly, among sea-Vezo, the marine *velomanpò* means using fishing gear to obtain value from the sea. Poverty exists because the gear is expensive and privately owned. Owners control rents and thus the means of production, appropriating some of the worker's labor value.

In the Mikea *velomanpò*/MoP, no person or group of persons is able to dominate the means of production nor the social relations of production. So as a Belò woman explained, Mikea are essentially rich. Their poverty is the result of others forcibly appropriating the value they have produced, through theft, trickery, and discrimination. This poverty is borne of their

physical and legal vulnerability, which is inextricable with the social mobility and opportunism central to the Mikea way of life.

Development projects based on “wealth creation” through improved production technology and access to capital will worsen poverty if the social relations of production (tenure and property rules) concentrate control of these improved inputs into the hands of the rich, as occurred in some parts of the world with the Green Revolution (Prahladachar 1983). For a project to reduce the kind of poverty expressed in the folk model, new technologies require changes to the social relations of production to encourage greater equity in access.

The folk model meets the livelihoods model

Two concepts from the livelihoods literature, both from Amartya Sen, are particularly compatible with the folk model of poverty and wealth. Wealth is akin to Sen’s concept of capability, and poverty to capability deprivation. While Masikoro, Vezo, and Mikea share the same basic functionings of subsistence and biological and social reproduction, as Sen describes, access to different assemblages of assets are needed to achieve these functionings, from land and cattle to ox carts to fishing gear. The ultimate causes of poverty in the folk model are what Sen would call entitlement failures. Masikoro farmers enjoy less than their full entitlement due to sharecropping and dependence on credit; mud-Vezo and some Mikea see their entitlement reduced by bandits; sea-Vezo must share their entitlement with the owners of fishing gear; and Mikea lose much of their entitlement to dishonest neighbors, prejudicial marketers, and corrupt gendarmes. Two other themes in the livelihoods literature, security and vulnerability, constitute causes of entitlement failure.

There is not much in folk model that speaks to capital as defined by Ellis (2000) and

Scoones (1998). The folk model includes neither social capital beyond the family nor human capital beyond working hard. Masikoro trade physical capital (cattle) for social capital (kin), and Mikea trade physical capital (cattle, cooking pots) for financial capital (cash for bribes and other emergencies), but the folk model does not articulate the larger, open-ended system of fungible capitals imagined by the livelihoods framework. Just as proponents of the EGM focus inappropriately on the scarcity of natural resources and markets, the livelihoods approach risks inappropriate focus on social and human resources that do not enter into the local model.

CONCLUSIONS

Poverty and wealth are neither objective phenomenon nor strictly Western constructs; they are the result of social relationships that vary significantly in different cultural settings. For a government or organization to reduce poverty *as perceived and experienced by the poor*, one needs to understand folk poverty models. Folk models neither validate nor reject theoretical explanations; we do not expect rural Malagasy to be intuitive capitalists or marxists. But folk models can help researchers to understand the kinds of interventions that would be culturally appropriate and most effective in specific settings. The method we demonstrate here is also useful for elucidating concerns at the community and regional levels.

We have seen that the folk model espoused by Masikoro, Vezo, and Mikea of Madagascar is largely incompatible with pro-growth, business, and wealth generation models common to international development. Nor is the folk model necessarily compatible with devolution schemes that would pass control to traditional social institutions. These social institutions have changed (caste, cattle) or did not serve resource management roles traditionally (*dina*).

The livelihoods approach captures much of the poverty experience in southwestern Madagascar within Sen's concepts of capability and entitlement, and with the rich vocabulary of concepts such as security and vulnerability. Where the livelihoods model is less useful is its focus on capitals. Like resources, technologies, and markets in the EGM, southwestern Malagasy do not perceive social, human, and natural capitals as scarce assets to be economized. While the capitals concept in the livelihoods literature has proved useful for understanding the multiple dimensions of poverty and for standardizing measurement, it is unlikely to generate projects that make much sense to Masikoro, Vezo, and Mikea because it assumes the same maximization rationality as the EGM and traditional business economics. While the substantivism of Polanyi and Sahlins seems rather old fashioned, it remains significant for its attention to alternate rationalities, at the cultural if not cognitive plane.

The Western model that best helps us to understand the experiences of poverty and wealth in southwestern Madagascar is mode of production. It best captures why material possessions are important—not as valuables in and of themselves, and not as stores of value exchangeable for natural, human, and social capitals—but as the engine of the *velomanpò* that produces both people and the food and society that supports them. The MoP explains why poverty occurs, borne from social relations of production that favor the more-powerful and create winners and losers. The MoP explains significant differences in poverty and wealth by subsistence mode, as farmers, fishers, and foragers obtain value from nature with different tools and social relations. Most significantly, the close correspondence between the folk model and the MoP suggests that business models of development will likely move more people into the local status of poor.

NOTES

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